NCA

VOC FOR IOP/FN

BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5532 MARCH 7, 1978
JOHN BUE/PARIS

FRENCH ELECTION SITUATIONER

ANNCR:

POLITICAL OBSERVERS ARE SCANNING THE HORIZON FOR INDICATIONS OF WHO WILL WIN THE CRUCIAL FRENCH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS STARTING NEXT WEEK. BUT VOA'S PARIS CORRESPONDENT, JOHN BUE, SAYS THAT SO FAR THESE INDICATIONS ARE THIN.

VOICE:

ACCORDING TO PUBLIC OPINION POLLS, THE LEFT HAS A VERY GOOD CHANCE OF GETTING MORE VOTES THAN THE GOVERNMENT COALITION IN THE FIRST ROUND OF VOTING NEXT SUNDAY (MARCH. 12). BUT SUNDAY'S VOTE IS A TRIAL RUN, WITH AN AVERAGE OF NEARLY NINE CANDIDATES FOR EACH SEAT. THE CRUNCH WILL COME ONE WEEK LATER ON MARCH NINETEEN, WHEN THE NUMBER OF CANDIDATES WILL BE SHARPLY REDUCE TO TWO OR THREE.

THIS SIMPLIFICATION WILL BE ACHIEVED PARTLY BY ATTRITION. THOSE OBTAINING LESS THAN TWELVE-AND-A-HALF PER CENT OF THE VOTES IN THE FIRST ROUND ARE ELIMINATED. ANOTHER FACTOR OF SIMPLIFICATION IS THE STRATEGY TRADITIONALLY OBSERVED BY THE LEAST LUCKY COALITION MEMBERS WHO STEP ASIDE AND CALL UPON THEIR VOTERS TO SUPPORT THE COALITION CANDIDATE WHO PLACED BEST IN THE FIRST ROUND. WITH THE GOVERNMENT COALITION UNDER UNPRECEDENTED PRESSURE FROM THE LEFT, THIS TRADITIONAL PROCEDURE IS EXPECTED TO WORK SMOOTHLY DESPITE COOL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO MAIN ELEMENTS OF THE COALITION, GAULLISTS AND GISCARDIANS.

BUT THE POSITION ON THE LEFT IS VERY MUCH MORE HAZARDOUS. SINCE THE BREAKDOWN IN THE UNION OF THE LEFT FIVE MONTHS AGO, THE COMMUNISTS HAVE BEEN PILING ABUSE UPON THEIR SOCIALIST PARTNERS

ACCUSING THEM OF BETRAYING THE IDEALS OF THE LEFT. THE COMMUNISTS ALSO ACCUSE THE SOCIALISTS OF BEING SOCIAL DEMOCRATS, WHICH IN THE MOUTH OF FRENCH COMMUNISTS IS ALMOST WORSE THAN BELONGING TO THE RIGHT.

SO FAR THE COMMUNISTS HAVE REFUSED TO COMMIT THEMSELVES TO ORDERING THEIR TROOPS TO BACK BEST-PLACED SOCIALISTS IN THE MARCH NINETEEN RUN-OFF. THE SOCIALISTS HAVE TURNED THE OTHER CHEEK AND SAY THEY WILL VOTE FOR BEST-PLACED COMMUNISTS. BUT HERE ONE HAS TO MAKE THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN WHAT PARTY CHIEFS SAY ON TELEVISION AND WHAT SOVEREIGN VOTERS DO IN THE POLLING BOOTH. TWO RECENT PARTIAL ELECTIONS SHOWED THAT RIGHTWING SOCIALISTS DID NOT FOLLOW THE PARTY LINE, AND VOTED TO THE CENTER INSTEAD. POLITICAL ANALYSTS IN FRANCE FEEL THE DRAMATIC INCREASE IN THE SOCIALIST PARTY'S POPULAR SUPPORT IS LARGELY AND PROBABLY PREDOMINANTLY DUE TO ATTRACTING NEW VOTERS ON ITS RIGHT.

ON THE OTHER HAND, IF THE COMMUNISTS DO DECIDE TO TELL THEIR VOTERS TO SUPPORT BEST-PLACED SOCIALIST CANDIDATES, THEY ARE LIKELY TO BE FOLLOWED BY A DISCIPLINED COMMUNIST ELECTORATE. THIS MAKES THEIR DECISION ALL THE MORE DIFFICULT SINCE THEY ARE NOT CERTAIN SOCIALIST VOTERS WILL DISPLAY THE SAME DISCIPLINE. THE MAIN RESULT OF THEIR DECISION MIGHT WELL BE TO FURTHER STRENGTHEN A SOCIALIST PARTY WHOSE STRENGTH THE COMMUNISTS RESENT ABOVE ALL.

THE THIRD PARTNER IN THE COALITION OF THE LEFT, THE RADICAL PARTY LED BY MISTER ROBERT FABRE, RECENTLY RAISED THE STAKES IN THE POKER GAME BETWEEN COMMUNISTS AND SOCIALISTS. HE SAID FIRMLY THAT HIS PARTY RULES OUT ANY NATIONALIZATIONS OF INDUSTRY BEYOND THOSE ADOPTED BY THE SOCIALISTS. HOWEVER, THE COMMUNISTS STILL ARE CALLING FOR MORE AS A CONDITION FOR COOPERATION IN THE RUNOFF.

THE RADICALS OF THE LEFT REPRESENT ONLY ABOUT THREE PER CENT OF THE POPULAR VOTE, BUT THIS THREE PER CENT MAY WELL BE WHAT HAS KEPT THE COALITION OF THE LEFT JUST ABOVE THE HALF-WAY MARK WIN PUBLIC OPINION POLLS FOR THE PAST SIX MONTHS. ANOTHER FACTOR IS THAT MISTER FABRE PAYED A CENTRAL ROLE IN THE SPLIT LAST SEPTEMBER BETWEEN SOCIALISTS AND COMMUNISTS.

GH/PY